

Message Text

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TAGS: OVIP (KISSINGER)

SUBJECT: PRESS MATERIAL

PLEASE PASS RODMAN/ADAMS/BORG FOR SECRETARY KISSINGER

1. HEREWITH FULL TEXT EVANS-NOVAK OP-ED, MARCH 20,
WASHPOST, ENTITLED "PRESIDENT THIEU'S GAMBLE."

2. U.S. OFFICIALS WERE NEITHER CONSULTED NOR
ALERTED BY PRESIDENT NGUYEN VAN THIEU BEFORE HE SUDDENLY
PULLED SOUTH VIETNAMESE TROOPS OUT OF THE CENTRAL
HIGHLANDS, SO THAT POLICYMAKERS HERE WERE STUNNED ALONG
WITH THE REST OF THE WORLD.

3. HAD THEY BEEN ASKED, MOST U.S. EXPERTS WOULD HAVE
GIVEN CAUTIOUS APPROVAL TO THIEU'S GAMBLE (THOUGH ONE
VIETNAMESE SPECIALIST HERE PRIVATELY CONSIDERS THE
WITHDRAWAL "PRECIPITOUS" AND BEARING GRAVE RISKS). THE
FACT THAT THEY WERE NOT ASKED COMPLETES THE END OF
WASHINGTON'S TUTORSHIP OVER SAIGON BUT ALSO CARRIES MORE
SINISTER CONNOTATIONS: RESENTMENT IN SAIGON THAT CONGRESS
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HAS DOOMED SOUTH VIETNAM TO DESTRUCTION.

4. THIEU ABANDONED THREE HIGHLANDS PROVINCES AND IS
WITHDRAWING FROM ONE OR TWO MORE NORTHERN PROVINCES IN
HOPE THAT THE ACCELERATING COMMUNIST OFFENSIVE BY NORTH

VIETNAMESE REGULARS MIGHT BE CONTAINED IF SAIGON
CONSTRISTS ITS LINES. BEHIND THAT HOPE IS THE REALITY OF
REDUCED U.S. MILITARY AID NOW AND INTO THE FUTURE. IN-
DEED, NORTH VIETNAM'S OFFENSIVE WAS CLEARLY PROMPTED BY
THE MOOD ON CAPITOL HILL. JUST AS PRESIDENTIAL
INTERVENTION SAVED SOUTH VIETNAM FROM THE COMMUNISTS IN
1965, CONGRESSIONAL DISENGAGEMENT MAY DELIVER THE
COUNTRY OVER TO HANOI IN 1975.

5. TODAY'S SOUTH VIETNAMESE ARMY (ARVN) BEARS NO FAINT
RESEMBLANCE TO THE DEMORALIZED RABBLE SAVED FROM
DESTRUCTION BY PRESIDENT JOHNSON A DECADE AGO. SEN.
HENRY M. JACKSON'S ATTEMPT TO JUSTIFY HIS NEW DOVISHNESS
WITH HIS ASTONISHING STATEMENT THAT THE ARVN WILL NOT
FIGHT IS UNANIMOUSLY REJECTED BY FIRST-HAND OBSERVERS.

6. THE BRITISH MILITARY AUTHORITY, SIR ROBERT THOMPSON,
CAME THROUGH WASHINGTON RECENTLY AFTER A VIETNAMESE
VISIT DECLARING SAIGON'S BEST OUTFITS--MARINES, AIRBORNE,
THE 1ST AND 2ND ARVN DIVISIONS--BETTER THAN ANY WESTERN
TROOPS TODAY, INCLUDING AMERICANS. DOVISH REP. PAUL N.
MCCLOSKEY, JR., OF CALIFORNIA, A MARINE INFANTRY OFFICER
IN KOREA, WAS SURPRISED BY THE HIGH CALIBER OF ARVN
UNITS HE VISITED THIS MONTH.

7. THUS, THIEU'S PULLOUT IS NOT COMPARABLE TO THE
INGLORIOUS RETREATS OF CHIANG KAI-SHEK'S NON-FIGHTING
CHINESE DIVISIONS IN 1949. RATHER, IT IS AN UNDER-
SUPPLIED ARMY TRYING TO COUNTER ITS FULLY SUPPLIED FOE
BY CONCENTRATING FORCES. SUCH AN IN-GATHERING WAS
PRIVATELY PREDICTED TO ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE
PHILIP HABIB WHEN HE ACCOMPANIED VISITING CONGRESSMEN
TO VIETNAM TWO WEEKS AGO.

8. BUT NEITHER HABIB NOR ANY OTHER OFFICIAL W S
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PREPARED FOR THIEU'S MOVE, SO OUT OF CHARACTER WITH
PAST ATTITUDES IN THE PRESIDENTIAL PALACE. GEN. THIEU
FORMERLY REJECTED SOUND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM AMERICAN
ADVISERS, PARTICULARLY THE LATE JOHN PAUL VAN, THAT
INDEFENSIBLE OUTPOSTS IN THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS NORTH
OF KONTUM BE ABANDONED. THIEU REFUSED TO GIVE UP REAL
ESTATE WITHOUT BATTLE.

9. TODAY, HOWEVER, HE IS GIVING UP KONTUM (SCENE OF MANY PAST SIEGES) AND PLEIKU BEFORE ANY FIGHT. THIEU APPARENTLY SEES HEAVY NORTH VIETNAMESE ARTILLERY AND ARMOR USED TO CAPTURE THE PROVINCIAL CAPITAL OF BAN ME

THUOT IN THE HIGHLANDS SOON BEING DEPLOYED AGAINST KONTUM.

10. ALTHOUGH COMMUNIST OPERATIONS ARE OFFICIALLY DESCRIBED HERE AS A "HIGH POINT," THEY LOOK LIKE A FULL-FLEDGED OFFENSIVE TO THE SAIGON HIGH COMMAND. BESIDES THE 968TH NORTH VIETNAMESE DIVISION COMING INTO THE KONTUM SECTOR FROM LAOS, ELEMENTS OF TWO MORE REGULAR DIVISIONS--THE 341ST AND THE 316TH--HAVE CROSSED OVER FROM NORTH VIETNAM. HANOI'S ACCELERATION OF CONSCRIPTION AND TRAINING SUGGESTS MORE UNITS ON THE WAY.

11. WHY HANOI HAS MOVED TO THE OFFENSIVE IS OBVIOUS. HOC TAP, THE NORTH VIETNAMESE THEORETICAL MONTHLY, IN JANUARY CORRECTLY PREDICTED "THE INABILITY OF THE UNITED STATES TO CONTINUE ITS MILITARY AND ECONOMIC AID AS IT DID PREVIOUSLY BECAUSE OF ITS DIFFICULTIES." TO EXPLOIT THAT, IT CALLED FOR "ATTACKING THE ENEMY ON ALL FRONTS."

12. THE BEST RESPONSE BY SAIGON WOULD BE, SAY KNOWLEDGEABLE U.S. OFFICERS, A COMBINED AIR-GROUND STRIKE IN THE HIGHLANDS BY FIGHTER-BOMBERS AND AIRBORNE UNITS. BUT TODAY'S LACK OF FUEL AND AMMUNITION, LIKELY TO GET WORSE INSTEAD OF BETTER, PREVENTS DIRECT ACTION.

13. THIEU'S ALTERNATIVE IS TO ABANDON A LIGHTLY POPULATED AREA POOR IN RICE. "IT'S A GOOD PHYSICAL
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SOLUTION, CONSIDERING THE PROBLEM," ONE U.S. VIETNAM-WATCHER TOLD US. "IT'S THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEM THAT WORRIES ME." THAT IS, WILL ABANDONING THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS BE PERCEIVED THROUGHOUT SOUTH VIETNAM AS A SIGNAL THAT ALL IS LOST?

14. SO, PRESIDENT THIEU IS TAKING A GAMBLE EVEN IF A NECESSARY ONE. BUT NECESSARY OR NOT, THERE IS NO CRITICISM FROM WASHINGTON. AFTER ARVN TROOPS HAD "WON" THE WAR IN 1972 (IN THE OPINION OF SIR ROBERT THOMPSON AND OTHER EXPERTS), THIEU WAS FORCED INTO SIGNING A "PEACE" TREATY WITH NO SAFEGUARDS AGAINST HANOI POURING REINFORCEMENTS INTO THE SOUTH. WITH MOSCOW AND PEKING GENEROUS IN MILITARY AID, THOSE REINFORCEMENTS ROLL DOWN FROM THE NORTH WITHOUT FEAR OF BOMBER ATTACK

TO FIGHT ARVN UNITS CRIPPLED BY U.S. AID CUTBACKS.
THIEU'S GAMBLE WAS SPAWNED IN WASHINGTON. (END TEXT.)
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